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Faith and Fossil Fuel Divestment - Massachusetts Model for All Faith Communities

Massachusetts is leading the way again. Our Commonwealth led by taking the case to the Supreme Court to require regulation of emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases that contribute to global warming (from new motor vehicles) under the Clean Air Act. And now, prompted by the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC), the 29th General Synod of the UCC voted overwhelmingly on July 1st in favor of a resolution urging divestment from fossil fuel companies and other strategies - from lifestyle changes to shareholder action - to combat climate change.

According to their webpage (www.macucc.org/news/detail/239), the resolution that passed calls on all settings of the denomination to "commit to using a spectrum of strategies to reduce the use of fossil fuels, our carbon footprint, and our complicity with the fossil fuel industry."

Strategies listed ranged from making lifestyle changes in homes, businesses and churches; demanding legislative action; engaging in public witness; and engaging in "activities, boycotts and shareholder actions with companies, up to and including divestment."

It calls for making "shareholder engagement on climate change an immediate, top priority for the next five years" and calls on both the United Church Funds and the Pension Boards to "create and promote an investment vehicle free of fossil fuel companies for qualified investors within 18-months."

The resolution also commits each of the next five Synods to hold a hearing on climate change.

This is setting a great example for us all. Anyone who is a stockholder, or has a pension, can move to participate in this new divestment movement. Although returns on fossil fuel stocks have been high, many scientists and environmentalists feel that fossil fuels are subsidized by the lack of a price on carbon pollution. Therefore they are getting a benefit for which they are not paying, while the rest of us do pay for the pollution.

A major point made by the divestment movement is that fund managers' duty to act prudently also means they have a responsibility to meet the needs of their investors, students and beneficiaries over the long term as well. And climate change driven by fossil fuel use will have a negative impact on beneficiaries of these funds over the long term.

The UCC understands that their resolution is "a model for all faith communities who care about God's creation and recognize the urgent scientific mandate to keep at least 80 percent of the known oil, gas and coal reserves in the ground. . . This vote expresses our commitment to the future. By this vote, we are amplifying our conviction with our money."

"This resolution calls on each and all of us to make difficult changes to the way we live each day of our lives," said Donald Hart, UCF president. "Implementing the multiple strategies outlined in this resolution will demand time, money and care — but we believe Creation deserves no less." (see www.ucc.org/news/GS2013-fossil-fuel-divestment-vote.html).

There is also a movement within universities to divest from fossil fuel investments. A NY Times letter writer from West Medford said it well, "Higher education's mission is to go beyond mere careerism to inculcate a responsibility to ensure a better future for all. While fossil fuels may be profitable, colleges and universities investing in them are voting with their dollars for a future of devastating climate change. Student campaigns for divestiture are environmentally, morally and economically sensible. As in the long campaign against apartheid, it is the voices of youth which express the better angels of human nature." (www.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/science/divesting-from-fossil-fuels.html?_r=0)

We can all take a page from these actions. We can make lifestyle changes in our homes (read past Green Sense articles for where to start or contact us at readingmassccp@hotmail.com), businesses and churches; we can demand legislative action; we can engage in protests and other activities - boycotts and shareholder actions - with companies, up to and including divestment.

This is one religious organization taking action, but it is the responsibility of us all to curb our use of fossil fuels throughout our lifestyles.

A column by members of Reading's Climate Committee Gina Snyder, Michele Benson and Stephanie Anderberg